

FOREWORD

Laresh Jayasanker's voice rang clear in the crowded and sometimes confusing world of food studies. His book's title, *Sameness in Diversity*, deftly summarizes his argument about contemporary food history: Because of multiple and sometimes competing forces, consumers confront a world of food that seems diverse, but one that is ultimately shared by most Americans, in the same stores and in similar restaurants. It's a complex culinary landscape in which American consumers think they have more food choices than ever, but their options come from only a handful of producers. Few of us have attempted to understand this paradoxical state of affairs, yet Jayasanker explains how our eating habits have come to be with clarity and precision.

In much of his research, Jayasanker sought to explain globalization's impact on the United States by charting changes in immigration, transportation, suburbanization, and commercial practices. His focus here on food—what we eat, how we eat, and how we think about the food we eat—illuminates the “lived experience of globalization in the United States” (p. 2). He connects large, impersonal forces to the everyday choices we make to feed ourselves and our families. Although much has been said and written about the recent culinary and dietary changes in the United States that have negatively impacted our health and the environment, such as the rise of fast food and agribusiness, no one has sufficiently explained the origins and evolutions of these dramatic and sometimes devastating transformations of our eating habits. Taking a broader approach and a longer view, Jayasanker mobilizes the metaphor of sameness in diversity to trace the histories of restaurants, grocery stores, corporations, and cookbooks. With marvelous ease he shifts from discussing massive changes in the corporate structures of grocery chains, to

providing a fine-grained analysis of a single menu at a strip-mall Indian restaurant. As a business and cultural history, *Sameness in Diversity* takes seriously the sites of food consumption and excavates a rich and engaging history of food markets where goods are not only bought and sold, but where producers and consumers negotiate daily what is good to eat, how foods are marketed, and how much those foods will cost.

Sameness in Diversity picks up where historian Donna Gabbaccia's influential *We Are What We Eat* left off, in chronicling the impact of immigrants on eating habits in the United States, in this case, after the Vietnam War, an event that exerted a profound influence on American immigration patterns and food habits. Jayasanker's book vividly chronicles the shifts in migration patterns, transportation systems, commercial practices, and labor rhythms that shaped the variety and cost of foods available in stores and restaurants. His analysis moves food history in a new direction, beyond an oversimplified understanding of how immigration influenced food habits. He demonstrates that it was not only the actions of immigrant entrepreneurs who opened doors for so-called ethnic cuisines in the United States, but a host of factors operating in concert that made these foods affordable, desirable, and familiar to the masses. This revolution was most apparent in grocery stores, where Americans shopped for a variety of ethnic foods, fresh produce, and an array of frozen foods, with more aisles and more choices than previous generations could ever imagine. Yet a simple trip to the (now virtual) grocery store reveals the paradoxes we confront as modern eaters: We are offered more food and a range of choices, but we wind up eating the same foods produced and sold by the same companies. This paradox is frequently due to circumstances beyond our control. Although it may seem that changes in our eating habits stem from personal taste or cultural exposure, larger forces weigh heavily, as Jayasanker demonstrates in his analyses of trade, transportation, government policies, and commercial practices. Changes in restaurant culture and cookbook publishing lead the reader to similar conclusions: Though we may be convinced we have more choices than ever in dining out or preparing ethnic foods at home, we inhabit the same culinary world, no matter where we come from, where we live, or where we are going.

Histories of globalization chronicle the vast and impersonal forces of change, oftentimes with little space devoted to individual consumer reactions. *Sameness in Diversity* details how grocers, restaurateurs, corporations, and publishers promoted specific foods and dishes, as well as how consumers understood the food they ate. The unique focus on individual translators, who took the time to explain new foods to wary consumers, suggests how new foods are accepted by American consumers. Jayasanker focuses on translators who made strange foods familiar and, as an unintended consequence, made all foods similar. These translators enabled consumers to navigate a dizzying array of food choices and settle on the familiar. His careful analysis of the cognitive processes by which individuals make

connections between familiar and unfamiliar foods suggests that the way we think about food, when reading restaurant menus or examining cookbooks, is also how we grapple with larger issues. The cognitive process by which we decide what to eat is of paramount significance today, when words and phrases like *paleo*, *vegan*, and *gluten-free* define not only what we eat but who we are.

Laresh Jayasanker's thought-provoking work proves how extraordinarily complex and even fragile our eating practices are, derived as they are from an interplay of global, local, and individual forces. Yet the book's passionate conclusion argues that, despite all of the paradox and complexity, food ultimately has the ability to unite us. Warning us against a pseudo-culinary cosmopolitanism, Jayasanker urges us all to eat more thoughtfully, to leave our neighborhoods, to turn off our mobile devices, and to share food with others: "Eat not the other. Eat with the other and we may bridge the many divides" (p. 149). They are words he lived by.

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